CHAPTER XXIV

FEASTS TO THE "BGHA"

THE CEREMONIAL OF THE FEASTS

776 782 "Mü xa do" (the great "Mü xa" or king of the "Mü xa") is the demon most intimately connected with the affairs of men. He may serve as their guardian and protector if properly propitiated with offerings; but he is more often feared as the author of all kinds of evil. Some Karens, especially in Shwegyin, regard him as a household deity to whom the family offer their sacrifices called "ta aw Bgha" (to eat the "Bgha"). He is addressed as "Thi Hko Mü Xa," and is evidently regarded as the lord of demons.[1] In most parts of the Sgaw Karen country, however, the "Bgha" is mentioned as being distinct from "Mü xa do" and, in a special way, as the tutelary god of the family by whom it is reverenced and feared. It is supposed to subsist upon the "k'las" or shades of the members of the family, if it is not provided generously with pork and chicken; and even then the family's immunity may not be assured. In their prayers and offerings the people sometimes associate the "T'reh t' hka" with the "Bgha," the former having, as I understand it, no connection with the family. Perhaps this is a precaution taken in the hope of appeasing whichever spirit may be responsible for the misfortune they are trying to alleviate.

769 A veneration of ancestors is manifest all through the family ceremonies treated in this chapter. The ancestors are thought of as taking an interest, although not always a friendly one, in the affairs of living men. The Karen do not, however, indulge in ancestor worship to the extent that the Chinese practice it.

776 The family "Bghas" are said to be eternal. As new unions take place and households are set up generation by generation, each family finds itself provided with a "Bgha" of its own. But what the relation of the new crop of "Bghas" is to that of the preceding generation, no one is able to explain.

887 611 562 The grandmother or the eldest female in the direct line of the family presides as the high priestess at the "Bgha" feast of the

[1] Dr. Wade in The Karen Thesaurus, new ed., Vol. I, p. 486.

19: Marshall M-6 (ca. 1910) 1922 APT Burma
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whole family. She is the "Bgha a' hko." This custom seems to hark back to the matriarchal stage of development among the Karen, as also does the fact that the groom goes to live with the bride's family. Why a woman should hold the place of honor at the "Bgha" feast has been "explained" to me in two ways, namely, (1) that a female was the first person to fall under the influence of "Mü kaw li" (Satan) in the orchard, and (2) that as the woman is the more susceptible to sickness, she properly has more to do with the offerings and should take the leading part in making them. The Karen maintain that the elders are responsible for these explanations and that the ceremonial of the "Bgha" feast has come down from time immemorial.

There are three kinds of "Bgha" feasts. The most familiar kind is that observed by the members of the immediate family when one of their number has fallen sick, in case divination shows that his illness is due to his having offended the "Bgha." In such a case the family must at once join in a feast. The second kind of feast is that observed as a preventive of possible sickness and as a means of keeping on good terms with the "Bgha." This is known as "ta aw bwaw a' tha" (eating to strengthen one's heart). The third kind of feast is that participated in by all the kindred, when the most elaborate rites are celebrated. Such a feast is called "ta aw saw ke saw na." While there is a general resemblance among the feasts held all over the Karen country, the various tribes and even parts of the same tribe differ in the details of their observances.

In the case of an illness found by divination to be due to the "Bgha," the ceremonial of the feast among the Sgaw Karen of the Tharrawaddy district and in the Pegu Hills, is as follows: After a pot of rice has been set on the fire to boil, a fowl is caught and killed, and its feathers are burned off in the fireplace. It is then cut up and cooked with salt and a chili and placed on the table or family tray. The father, mother, and children in the order of their ages severally partake of a morsel, after which they eat their meal together. If the parents of the father and mother are living, the feast is held in the morning; but if they are dead, it is held in the afternoon. On the following morning a pig is caught, brought into the house, and its legs are tied together. It is then killed by strangulation or by wrenching the neck, care being taken not to break any of its bones or bruise its skin lest some of its blood should be spilled. The body of the pig is then run through lengthwise on

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the purpose of improving the conditions and keeping their crops from being ruined. Failure to observe this custom brings disappointment ("t' kle t htwa"), for one's labor will be worse than useless. On the plains, where they prepare a dirt threshing-floor after the Burman style, it used to be prohibited to drive a cart across it or to walk on it with shoes on. In other sections, where the threshing is done on a great mat, no one may step on it but the members of the family who take part in the work. The succulent shoots of vegetables, which are grown with the paddy, must not be cut with a sharp knife or other instrument, inasmuch as cutting would endanger the "k'la" or life principle of the paddy and scare away the demons that preside over the fields. Both the vegetables and their shoots, the latter being largely used for greens, must be plucked with the fingers. Another tabu prevents the eating of flesh during harvest-time. Any family who should transgress this precept would find, it is believed, that their supply of rice had vanished from the storage bin.

The following examples of tabus relating to domestic animals may be cited. If a sow or bitch has a litter composed only of females, they must all be killed. When less than three chicks are hatched from a nest of eggs, they must be killed. So also must the chick whose down dries fast to the feathers of the mother hen. A crowing hen is likewise doomed to death. These phenomena are supposed to be signs of weakness in the creatures concerned, for which some offended demon is responsible. Such weakness must not be allowed to spread.

Certain tabus contribute to preserve the integrity of the family through the female line. One of these prevents any outsider from entering a house where the family is celebrating the "Bgha" feasts. Indeed, a tabu debars from such gatherings the men who have married into the family, while those who are privileged to attend must remain in the house during the performance of the rites.

On the plains, where the Karen villagers build separate houses after the manner of the Burmans, persons are forbidden to drive their carts through the village road close enough to the houses to bump against the supporting posts. This tabu, which, in the eyes of a Westerner, partakes of the nature of a town ordinance, is enforced upon the offender by the imposing of a fine, namely, four annas in money or a fowl, payable to the heads of the household con-

23: Benedict
184, 192, 582, 591, 602, 611, 613, 614, 616, 618, 621

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/For lists of kinship terms, and for excellent and detailed information concerning correlations between kinship terminology, patterns of behavior, and social institutions, see category 601./